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# The Octavia E. Butler Papers

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## The Octavia E. Butler Papers

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BY NOW it surely goes without saying that Octavia E. Butler (1947-2006) had an utterly transformative influence on the science fiction genre, rising to become one of the best-loved and most-studied authors in the field and inspiring the generation of writers (especially the nonwhite and nonmale writers) that followed her. Her accomplishment is all the more impressive given that during her life she published only twelve novels (one of which, *Survivor* [1978], she explicitly disavowed) and seven short stories (two of which, “Crossover” and “Near of Kin,” had little or no science fictional content). So much has already been written on Butler, in fact, and from so many different theoretical orientations—feminist theory, queer theory, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, ecocriticism, disability studies, the medical humanities, science studies, Marxist and utopian studies—that it may seem to the emerging scholar that her work has been fully “mined,” that there is nothing left to study or to say. But in fact the opposite is true: the work that has been studied up to this point represents only a thin sliver of Butler’s total creative output. The rest has been hidden away in boxes all this time—and has now become available to scholars at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California, outside Pasadena (the city in which Butler grew up).

This short article is intended to provide an introduction to the Butler papers and highlight some of the collection’s most important treasures, encouraging scholars who are interested in Butler’s work to visit the Huntington and explore the voluminous archive left behind by her untimely, too-early death in February 2006. These observations come out of my own time spent in the Huntington researching her life and career for a book forthcoming in the MODERN MASTERS OF SCIENCE FICTION series, beginning in December 2013, shortly after the archive first opened. In the process I seek to schematize the material for potential researchers and make some preliminary observations about its character, as well as highlight a few of the methodological opportunities and potential scholarly pitfalls made possible by this unusually rich research space.

What I say here is intended to benefit Butler scholarship in two senses: first, by encouraging scholars to visit and use this archive, and second by giving such potential researchers some sense of just how much material is available at the Huntington and thus what sorts of varied projects it might support. My typical reference has been to note that the *finding aid* for the collection is 500 pages long, just by itself—but even this gives little indication of the truly immense size and range of the collection. My sense is that Butler had an almost totemic relationship with her writing, as if she endeavored to keep every piece of paper she had ever touched. The Butler collection at the Huntington thus includes everything from childhood journals to copyedited galleys to research notes to letters to discarded scraps of paper—tens of thousands of pages in hundreds of boxes that will, we should hope, vitalize a new wave of Butler scholarship for decades to come.



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## MAJOR RESOURCES OF THE HUNTINGTON LIBRARY

### Alternate Versions of Butler's Published Work

The work Butler published during her life can somewhat easily be divided into discrete periods by virtue of the different science fictional series she was working on at the time:

#### **Juvenilia and Early Work**

"Crossover" (1971)

#### **First PATTERNIST trilogy (early 1970s)**

*Patternmaster* (1976), *Mind of My Mind* (1977), *Survivor* (1978)

#### **Kindred and PATTERNIST prequels (late 1970s)**

"Near of Kin" (1979), *Kindred* (1979), *Wild Seed* (1980)

#### **Clay's Ark and the major short stories (early 1980s)**

*Clay's Ark* (1983), "Speech Sounds" (1983), "Bloodchild" (1985), "The Evening and the Morning and the Night" (1987)

#### **XENOGENESIS trilogy (later rebranded LILITH'S BROOD)**

*Dawn* (1987), *Adulthood Rites* (1988), *Imago* (1989)

#### **PARABLE series (unfinished)**

*Parable of the Sower* (1993), *Parable of the Talents* (1998)

#### **The Late Work**

"The Book of Martha" (2003), "Amnesty" (2003), *Fledgling* (2005)

To this list can be added two posthumous publications: "Childfinder" (1971), a proto-Patternist story about telepaths that was her first fiction sale, slated for Harlan Ellison's never-released *Last Dangerous Visions*, and "A Necessary Being" (mid-1970s), a novella-length chapter excised from *Survivor*, both of which appeared in the eBook *Unexpected Stories* from Open Road Media in 2014.

A first, obvious resource of the Huntington is access to the alternate versions of these novels and stories; significantly distinct discarded versions exist for nearly every one:

- All of the books in the initial PATTERNIST trilogy—*Patternmaster*, *Mind of My Mind*, and *Survivor*—were in fact written and rewritten multiple times between Butler's teenage years and their eventual publication when she was 29; their development can be quite firmly traced out of Butler's juvenilia (in composition notebooks) through the different drafts she toyed with as she tried to get the story right in across the lean years of the early 1970s;
- *Kindred* went through several versions, including a completed alternate draft (designated *Canaan*) which places it in the PATTERNIST universe, and which features an entirely different plot resolution that turns the published book's themes on its head, by allowing the time-traveling 1970s character to unexpectedly

- rescue her ancestor from slavery rather than condemning her to misery in the name of survival;
- *Dawn* was an almost completely different novel in its earlier drafts, originally derived from an abandoned 1970s short story called “The Evening and the Morning and the Night”—a title Butler later reused—that was also set in the PATTERNIST universe (discussed below);
- *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* also underwent extensive reconsideration during her struggle to complete the stories: *Sower* was originally set in an entirely different narrative context, and also featured chapters set during Lauren Olamina’s adulthood that cast her in an entirely different, much more complicated light, while Butler’s inability to proceed on *Talents* resulted in myriad abandoned plot spurs that complicate or reverse what happens in the published novel;
- “The Book of Martha” is a distillation (and in some ways a deliberate rejection) of several stories and novels she was unable to proceed on during the period of her worst writer’s block of her career, beginning in the mid-1990s and proceeding to the end of her life; intriguing initial drafts exist for an alternate version of “Amnesty” as well, focused on entirely different aspects of the alien invasion depicted there.

New research projects on Butler could be sustained simply with regard to these alternative drafts—but they too represent only a fraction of what is available at the Huntington.

### **Significant Unpublished Work**

In addition to alternative versions of her published work, the Huntington possesses full or partial drafts (and in some cases *multiple* full drafts) of unpublished novels and stories abandoned by Butler at different stages in her career. Strictly enforcing “significant” as a qualifier to denote the extent of the work’s completion as well as its potential importance to Butler’s scholars, a surprisingly impressive list of works nonetheless presents itself:

#### **“The Evening and the Morning and the Night [I]” (various versions, early 1970s, ultimately abandoned around 1975)**

This is a very early story set in the Missionary wing of the PATTERNIST universe, detailing (like *Survivor*) the adventures of human settlers fleeing Earth in the face of the rise of the Patternist telepaths and the collapse of human civilization. Butler intended to write many such stories, with some missions ending in success and others in failure, while still others resulted in such a total transformation of the original Mission parameters that “success” and “failure” would no longer qualify. “The Evening and the Morning and the Night [I]” is the only one of these that was significantly developed, and takes up the “failure” side of possible outcomes: it depicts the last four survivors of a Mission crash-landing clinging to life on a brutally inhospitable alien world. Myriad versions of the story exist in the archive, with interesting variations worthy of hypertextual presentation and study.

***Doro-Jesus (abandoned 1970s)***

The best-developed of her unfinished PATTERNIST stories and novels, this one is a science-fictional rewriting of the life of Christ as part of the PATTERNIST milieu, reframing both the Virgin Mary and Jesus as part of Doro's breeding project and all of the major events of the Gospels as the result of Doro and Jesus's Oedipal contest for superiority. While this exists primarily in note form, a number of chapters were actually written, including one that prominently features a sex scene between Doro and the Virgin Mary.

Many other proto- and potential versions of possible books in the Patternist series exist in the archive, but this is the most developed in terms of actual chapters written and plot sketched.

***Blindsight (1980s)***

This is Butler's completed but unpublished novel, depicting the rise of a blind cult leader named Aaron Taylor who has the power of *psychometry* (a version of telepathy linked to touch). Two significant versions of the novel exist, the first abandoned c. 1981 and the second abandoned c. 1984; they overlap in some ways but are quite distinct in others. Some drafts of the second link *Blindsight* to the PATTERNIST milieu as well. Butler personally considered this novel unsuccessful, and it never sold—but it nonetheless provides an interesting counterpoint some of her published novels, especially the XENOGENESIS books; both the Oankali's "healing touch" and their polyamorous sexual triads (experienced as disturbing and undesired by some of their participants) originate in altered form in *Blindsight*.

***Parable of the Trickster (1989-2006)***

Almost certainly the crown jewel of the collection from the perspective of Butler scholarship, the Huntington contains the dozens of drafts Butler composed for the unfinished third novel in the PARABLES series, *Parable of the Trickster*. As Butler sometimes mentioned in interviews, *Trickster* was sometimes conceived as the last book in the series and other times conceived as only one of four (or more) books each taking place on different extrasolar worlds—a return to her 1970s idea of writing multiple Missionary future-history books.

*Trickster* can in fact be subdivided into several discrete versions. *God of Clay* (1989) predates even the early drafts for *Sower*; Butler in fact seems to have begun composing *Sower* as the necessary backstory for *Clay*, ultimately deciding to spend two novels in that backstory before returning (unsuccessfully) to the narrative situation about extrasolar colonization with which she had begun. *Trickster* is thus both the origin point for the PARABLES, as well as its unfinished conclusion.

Alongside approximately a dozen aborted narrative threads, the late 1990s and early 2000s *Tricksters* exists primarily in extensive world-building notes about the planet Bow on which the action was to take place, as well as about the architecture and social norms constructed by the Earthseeders upon their arrival. Nearly all of Butler's narratives set in this place, however, are abandoned after thirty or so pages. In general the pattern of these novels is that the colonists are confronted with a crisis that threatens the stability of the colony, typically originating in physical or mental crisis of the body (sudden blindness, hallucinations, or rages) or of the society (the first murder on Bow). These

fragments would be best taken up together as a kind of hypertext, as none truly comprises a significant completed narrative in its own right.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the abandoned plots of *Trickster* spiraled out into alternative projects, of which only a few (*Fledgling*; “The Book of Martha”; “Amnesty”) saw final publication. A brief description of a few of the other projects follows below:

### ***Paraclete/Mortal Words* (2000s)**

This novel is not as completed as either “Evening (I)” or *Blindsight*, but is the most fully developed uncompleted novel in the archive: a dozen or so completed chapters from the novel exist (seemingly comprising between one-third and one-half of the ultimate plan for the novel). This novel depicts a woman who receives, as a strange gift from a dead neighbor, the ability to literally write the truth—anything she writes down becomes a fact. The unfinished novel unfurls from here almost like a *Twilight Zone* episode as she tests the limits, ethical implications, and ultimate desirability of this power, in surprising and at times very disturbing ways.

### ***Spiritus/Bodhisattva* (2000s)**

Less developed than *Paraclete*, a few early chapters of this reincarnation-centered narrative exist, as well as notes suggesting where the story was to have gone. Butler was interested here in the idea of a secret society of immortals controlling human history for their own ends, recasting the struggles of the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries as their machinations and moving forward into the possible futures that different factions of the immortals seek to build.

### ***Fledgling II* (2005-2006)**

Also very undeveloped, *Fledgling II* (typically designated *Asylum*) exists primarily in the form of scattered ruminations on the shape Shori’s story might take in future narratives. Only a few chapters have been fully or even partially written, some of them in mutually incompatible narrative frames. However, one can identify a number of possible trajectories for the series based on what does exist, most of them focused on a story of Shori’s brutal abduction and imprisonment by a rival Ina family. A few tantalizing hints go further still, imagining either a long-running series that puts Shori in charge of a resort hotel (whereby she could encounter new situations to intervene in book after book after book, in a plot engine reminiscent of episodic television like *Murder, She Wrote* or *Love Boat*) or else an apocalyptic narrative that would have seen Shori’s children, freed from the biological constraints that made their quiet symbiosis with humankind mutually beneficial, overrunning the Earth and destroying civilization.

### **Short Stories (1960s-2006, especially 1960s-1980s)**

A final category of completed but unpublished work consists of Butler’s many unpublished and unfinished short stories. The short story is a style of writing she ultimately concluded her writing process and habits were incompatible with; however, this self-recognition was somewhat hard fault, and resulted in many interesting narratives and fragments that shed new light on her thought and on her career despite their unfinished form. Many of these stories are juvenilia, depicting a very nascent version of the PATTERNIST series as it took shape in her mind as a young teenager; as I argue in my larger book, one of the most fascinating things revealed

by the archive is the level of fidelity Butler exhibited across her career to the stories she had made up as a relatively young girl, and how she returned to those originary ideas in new ways over and over again for the entirety of her career.

The archive, through its voluminous, even vertiginous completeness, also details the unhappy early career of a talented writer who just can't sell her work (as with the myriad attempted revisions of "Evening [I]" described above and below). Thus we frequently see Butler tinkering with ideas and abandoning them, only to return to them years or decades later when her career is more established; we also see, unexpectedly, a few brief attempt to leave the SF genre altogether in favor of the mode she called "CF" (commercial fiction): romance-centered stories marketed to women that, despite a deliberate attempt to perfectly replicate the conventions of the genre and make them "easy sales," frequently contained the sorts of grotesque or disturbing elements that were the hallmarks of Butler's other fiction.

### **Idea Work**

Butler's method included a tremendous amount of brainstorming and note-making; in fact the earliest prose written about many of her books was closer to advertising copy than to literary prose, seeking to excite an imagined public (or publisher, or perhaps herself) about the story that was about to unfold. Many of these stories exist only in bare but evocative sketches, like the abandoned novel *Justice* or *The Justice Plague* (about a contagious, disease-like form of empathy that would ultimately appear in different form as "hyperempathy" in the PARABLE books), *Martyr* (a fantasy existing somewhere at the intersection of *Blindsight* and *Doro-Jesus*, about a being of godlike power and the close associate/lover who must someday betray him), or *Frogs* (about a planet that suddenly becomes incredibly gender-biased when too few, or too many, men start being born). There is even a folder containing a few preliminary stabs toward *Star Trek* fan fiction. There are dozens upon dozens of such gems in the archive, some of which are considered seemingly only for an afternoon and others of which return to Butler again and again across her career. In the second category one would have to include Butler's great unfinished project, the crafting of a feminist utopia, a topic which had interested her since the 1970s when such books were very popular and which inspired aspects of many of her greatest novels (the XENOGENESIS and PARABLES books, as well as *Fledgling*). To an extent Butler saw not race, but *men*—masculinity, not just on the level of ideology but on the level of biology—as the real problem to be solved. Most of the strongest feminist-utopia elements of her novels, explicitly planned for in her sketches and personal notes for composition, fell out of these books as she wrote them, making them a thread running across her career that can best be seen only when reconstructed from the cutting room floor.

### **Notes, Journals, Letters, and More**

In addition to her fragmentary, unfinished, and unpublished fictional work, the Huntington also includes a seemingly complete archive of Butler's critical essays and speeches; her personal notes and journals, set across at least three distinct systems of journal-keeping (the personal diary, travel diaries, and "commonplace books" written in lined composition journals); a huge number of letters; full correspondence with her interviewers, often including information that did not make the final profile; galley copies and editorial correspondence; scrap paper; signs hung around her office to inspire her; and much more.

Butler described herself as a “packrat,” but perhaps a more aggressive contemporary description would be “hoarder”; even after moving from her Los Angeles home to Altadena at the end of the 1980s, and then to Seattle in the 1990s, she seems to have endeavored to keep every piece of paper she had ever written on (ultimately deploying a storage unit for this purpose). Many of her juvenile stories appear in the composition notebooks in which she originally wrote them; other stories from the 1970s appear on the back of paper she had taken from wherever she was doing clerical temp work on the time; folders at the Huntington are filled with doodles, phone numbers hastily jotted down, and the like. Butler’s packrat tendencies, coupled with the fact that she died unexpectedly and was not able to “prune” her archive before it was turned over to the library, has resulted in an incredibly complete picture not only of her career but of her day-to-day life. One is able to reconstruct a sense of Butler’s work and leisure habits, daily routine, and mental and physical decline in the face of her long-term post-1990s illness through the many pieces of paper that she kept around her while she worked.

Of particular interest to science fiction scholars, I suspect, will be Butler’s own theoretical and critical commentary, not simply on her own work but on the genre as a whole. A remarkable autodidact, Butler was a keen and very savvy observer of culture, even beyond what already appears in her published stories and essays—and of course she had a very smart, finely tuned understanding of what her own work was doing as well. The sense of Butler as a companion theorist, as fellow scholar and critic, that emerges out of study of her papers will, I hope, be an exciting part of Huntington-based research on her work in the coming decades.

### ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I mention both in the *MODERN MASTERS* book and in the ICFA panel on archival research published as an interview elsewhere in this issue of the *Eaton Journal of Archival Research in Science Fiction*, the sheer size and unusual scope of this collection poses some difficult ethical problems for the prospective Butler researcher. Unlike other writers of note, Butler did not have an opportunity to control the transmission of her personal papers to the Huntington. With miniscule and seemingly unimportant exceptions—a few boxes of material detailing other people’s personal financial or health records—what is now available to scholars is simply everything that was in her possession when she died.

How to handle such a totally unfiltered archive appropriately is a very hard methodological question, one on which many different researchers will inevitably come to vastly different conclusions. The material is there for us, and was kept by her so as to be available by researchers; she was instructing her potential heirs to donate her material to the Huntington from the mid-1990s on. However, from my perspective an “anything goes,” let-the-dead-bury-the-dead attitude towards her papers becomes quite untenable as one starts to consumer her private letters and personal journals, many of which seem to have been composed in times of deep emotional pain, as well as which make observations that could be hurtful to people still alive in ways that Butler (whose letters demonstrate her to be an incredibly kind and generous soul, often inviting her fans to call her at her home for personal mentoring on their fiction) would never have wanted.

Butler was also, in the best sense, a fantasist, particularly as a young woman, and many of her journals bleed into her fantasies and her fictions in ways that



become very difficult to extract. As a teenager, for instance, she moves freely between writing stories about psychics and imagining herself as an emerging psychic, whose powers are sure to emerge at any moment; in her dark years in the 1970s and even later, it can sometimes be hard to tell when she is writing in the first-person about herself and when she is writing about a character.

Having spent a lot of time with this material, I can only advise care and caution on the part of researchers, and suggest that they consider carefully what material they use and reference in their work. I do not think this is a reliable or somehow universally intuitable moral proposition; I am sure that in my own research and publication on Butler's archive I have crossed lines that other researchers would have left untrammelled. But it is a question to be approached with care and deliberation as this material becomes more and more a part of Butler scholarship in the coming decades.

When she was alive Butler guarded her public image quite jealously: she was a very shy and very private person, not prone to public feuds or the sorts of internecine quarrels that sometimes characterize science fiction fandom. She was also someone who, while cognizant of her immense talent, oftentimes felt not only like an outsider to the SF community but also as if she were being judged as a "representative" of African-American culture writ large. For most of her career she refused to read her own work in public, for fear of becoming tangled in her own words; she would instead give short lectures and take questions. In no small part due to her dyslexia, she was by her own admission an atrocious speller, and struggled across her career to produce copy that was free of any type of error; she would be mortified if that work were to be reproduced now with *[sic]* after *[sic]* marking every error. That she left behind this archive for us so that we might gain access to the parts of her life she kept private is an immense gift, but one that I at least believe entails a duty to use responsibly, and in ways that would not embarrass or humiliate her or the people that she loved. This is of course a difficult problem for all archival literary scholarship, not just for Butler scholars; I do not imagine I could solve it in these short pages.

#### **A FEW GLOBAL OBSERVATIONS**

One of the things I became most interested in as I read Butler's alternative drafts and unfinished work is the sharp tonal divide between the drafts and the final books. Butler had a theory of bestsellerdom that preoccupied her and motivated her writing, but which she was unable to ever quite put into practice: she sought endlessly to write what she called YES-BOOKS, but felt they always seemed to collapse into NO-BOOKS instead. (YES BOOKS, she thought, were bestsellers—NO BOOKS sold, alas, the way her actual books did.) One of the things I was personally surprised by in the archives was the way that optimism—usually an optimism predicated on what Lee Edelman has famously called "reproductive futurity," the presence and survival of children<sup>2</sup>—was quite often a late or unwilling addition to her novels, something that emerged as she struggled to turn her many swirling ideas into concrete forms she believed would actually sell. Perhaps relatedly, we often see the drafts are actually much more disturbing than her famously disturbing published fiction, particularly with regard to physical and sexual violence, and frequently ending with far unhappier resolutions. (This is all the more remarkable for how pessimistic and horrifying Butler's published fiction often was.)

We might perhaps say that her published works tend to be MAYBE-BOOKS, somewhere between YES and NO—but in her drafts the form of the NO-BOOK is allowed to fully flower, precisely because these unfinished tales were never hammered into what she saw as final, publishable, salable shape. Not having to conform to what she saw as the market's mandatory optimism, the drafts represent in some sense the excess, or the remainder, of "YES."

Thus we find the sketches story where the typical logic of reproductive futurity is turned completely on its head, a number of which I have mentioned above: the fascinating novel fragment where Doro impregnates the Virgin Mary and produces Christ, who is so talented as to *almost* be the two-thousand-years-too-early fulfillment of his breeding project and yet who instead becomes a famously chaste, sexless reproductive dead end; or the version of the future of the *Fledgling* universe where she imagines Shori not as the liberator of the Ina but as the destroyer of the planet, as her children would be *too* powerful, *too* successful, and would in their thriving overthrow the delicate ecological symbiosis that holds humans and Ina in balance. Likewise, some of her notes for the end of the PARABLES series (the so-called *Parable of Clay*) suggest that the children of the Earthseed colony worlds would be deeply psychotic or (by our standards, at least) severely autistic, almost monstrous in their difference from the humans of Earth—tokens of a future so utterly posthuman as to be at least potentially *anti-human*.<sup>3</sup> Her first sketches for *Lilith*, the story that would become XENOGENESIS, see "Lilith's child, mercifully born dead, is an armless, legless horror with some skin disorder that has left it looking raw, flayed. Lilith's child is only the first 'mistake' to be born. Sadly, some of them live, in spite of the lack of medical care or knowledge."<sup>4</sup> In its original formulation the Oankali breeding project is a horror after all, whose failure we are glad to see. (Echoes of this plan can actually be found in the published *Imago*, though the situation there resolves somewhat differently, and much more in accord with both the optimism of reproductive futurity and with Butler's growing sympathy for the Oankali.) Even the happy ending of the *Canaan* version of *Kindred*, in which the Alice character is rescued from slavery and raised in the 1970s as Dana and Kevin's child, is a NO-BOOK, albeit of an unusual sort: it refuses the reconciliation with the history that the published book enforces in favor of a fantastical utopian alternative that is utterly impossible to make real, and which has no future anyway in the face of the inevitable rise of the Patternists.

"The Evening and The Morning, and the Night" (I)—bearing only slim relation to the famous story that would eventually be published under that name, and having much more in common with the very first versions of the Xenogenesis books—is perhaps exemplary. The story takes place in the "Missionary" wing of the PATTERNIST milieu, a la *Survivor* (which itself originates in an interesting dialogue about reproductive futurity: the Patternists may take over the Earth, but their work is ultimately sterile and doomed to extinction because their too-close psychic link prevents them from leaving the planet to ensure species immortality). In the story, a small group of Missionaries are all that survive a crash on a hostile alien world: four women and one man. The characters are utterly despondent, especially the point-of-view character, frequently bemoaning the fact that they have survived at all, wishing they had died on Earth or in the crash.

One of the characters becomes pregnant (after this point the man often dies, in the later rewrites). The pregnancy should be a token of hope, but in most of the versions of the story that exist is perceived instead just another disaster—what

possible life could the child ever have in this wretched place? In some versions the birth ultimately happens, but is horrible: the fetus is born dead, horribly misshapen, seemingly mutated by the radiation that is either ambient in the planet or perhaps already at work corrupting their own cells into cancer. In one version, the hopeless survivors conclude the fetus is “luckier than any of us”; in another they simply collapse together and weep in hopeless sorrow.<sup>5</sup> (This is, to be sure, a NO story.) The Mission, the point of view character realizes, was “a farce, a lie for fools like Erica who had to believe in spite of everything that they had a chance. [...] How many had discovered plague aboard while they were still in space? How many ships now carried corpses and perhaps a few no-longer-human beings? How many had landed on planets more actively hostile than this one? How many had crashed? How many had...”<sup>6</sup> The staggering list of possible misadventures for the Missionaries, all ending in disaster, oddly presages Butler’s inability to finish *Parable of the Trickster* decades later, which was similarly intended to show a line of futurity for human beings leading to multiple futures (and multiple humanities) on multiple planets, none of which she could hold in her imagination for very long, none of which was ever truly “reproductive.”

This “excess,” the excess of NO, holds over in the writing of the published version of “The Evening and the Morning and the Night,” a story written a decade later that similarly wrestles with the ideas of suicide, deliberate childlessness, and disability. In that story the characters are born with a severe inherited disability modeled on Huntington’s Disease, one that condemns carriers to inevitably suffer a permanent decline into self-destructive insanity at some point in their middle years. The characters in the story, knowing they are carriers, refuse the idea of ever having children, even as this suggests to them that they themselves should never have been born—and many carriers do, indeed, attempt suicide. The published version of the story suggests an optimistic resolution to this situation, wherein colonies of the sufferers might find ways to live together and have meaningful lives, stabilized by the pheromonic closeness of certain special female characters like the narrator. The published version, that is, suggests a certain sort of middle ground between reproductive futurity and sterility/suicide: no children, maybe, but not no future.

But the drafts point us in other directions. One early draft ends in an orgy, a “strange, silent, gentle orgy”—a different sort of utopia, one suggesting perhaps Edelman’s “no future” utopia of sex without children.<sup>7</sup> In another, the community sourly breaks down as the men and women become unable to pair bond in the ways that had once, briefly, seemed utopic: “the similarly that had brought us together seemed to have turned into something else altogether.”<sup>8</sup> Most interesting to me is a version in which Lynn is tempted by the vision of disabled, queered, anti-reproductive futurity, but refuses it on ethical grounds: *This is the story of Lynn Anda’s struggle to make a place for herself in spite of her disease, public fear, and prejudice, and the realization that she can be a power if she is willing to condemn others to agony. This is the story of a potential Doro who says “No,” thus agreeing to the quiet, bloodless extinction by attrition of her people.*<sup>9</sup>

This last possibility is the story, I think, that Butler wanted to write but never quite found a way to, the story that in some sense she seemed to find untellable: the story of the people who in the end *do* say “no,” who refuse the instinct to live at whatever cost, the ones who refuse to compromise even if it means their destruction. She was fascinated in her writing by the idea there might be some limit point past which life might actually become intolerable, past which survival

*wasn't* desirable or possible—and seemed dedicated, in her delightfully grim way, of pushing her characters closer and closer to that line to see what might lay on the other side. What the drafts help make visible, I think, is the extent to which nearly all of works (even the ones most devoted to reproductive futurity and survival) actually end on this kind of gray note, this moment of doubt, despite their surface optimism: the dead-end sterility of the Patternists; the possible superfertility of the post-Shori Ina; the toxic, deadly parasite-reproductivity of the T'lic aliens in “Bloodchild”; the words CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS emblazoned on the side of the Earthseeder's spacecraft; the historical amnesia at the end of *Kindred* into which all the antebellum characters ultimately fall; the supposedly inevitable doom of the Mars colony in *XENOGENESIS*, written clear-as-day in our genes; and so on. Butler was keenly aware in her own life of the ways in which the optimism normally associated with reproductive futurism can, agonizingly, break down: her father's early death gave her a fascination with “parents who are not allowed to raise their own children,” while her mother's four previous stillbirths gave her a keen, lifelong sense of the ways in which pregnancy can figure things other than pure, unvarnished, uncomplicated hope.

What we might provisionally call “reproductive Afrofuturism” is, I think, the *troubled* affirmation of survival we find when we hold Butler's finished works in juxtaposition with her notes, first drafts, and abandoned projects as found in the Huntington. Hers is a futurism that is never 100% sure, where “optimism” always threatens to tip over into “cruel optimism” instead. Margaret Atwood sees a similar pattern in her own work, calling it *ustopia*: utopia and dystopia existing simultaneously, in quantum superposition, each one always threatening to suddenly flip into the other.<sup>10</sup> For Butler, it is not just that “we were never meant to survive,” as Audre Lorde once put it<sup>11</sup>—we're not even all that sure we *want* to, though we must, and we do. Where the improv comic celebrates the “yes/and,” for Butler it was always rather the Trickster's ambiguously dialectical “yes—but...”

These observations return us, perhaps somewhat uncomfortably, to those ethical questions about the use of Butler's private journal entries, often composed in moments of sadness, even anguish. In many of these entries her depression and loneliness are quite palpable, especially when read from a perspective many decades in the future: one can see Butler struggling with problems she is simply never able to solve, whose terms she narrates to herself again and again and again. Butler thought of herself as a survivor, and thought of her characters as survivors—but she recognized that survival was often *mere* survival, that too often there was “little glamor” or “little pleasure” in it, and sometimes it was “not good enough.”<sup>12</sup> It's little wonder that she was so attracted, as a sort of personal mantra, to the word *persist*, the word she returned to again and again in her advice for writers and for living, “Furor Scribendi,” published in her story collection *Bloodchild*. “It's amazing,” she writes there, “what we can do if we simply refuse to give up.”<sup>13</sup> The tens of thousands of her pages in the Huntington Library, for all their twists and turns and ups and downs, are a testament to that incredible spirit.

## Notes

1. I am able to go into more detail about the alternate versions of *Trickster* in a piece written for the *Los Angeles Review of Books* in June 2014: "'There's Nothing New / Under The Sun, / But There Are New Suns': Recovering Octavia E. Butler's Lost Parables," available on the web at <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/theres-nothing-new-sun-new-suns-recovering-octavia-e-butlers-lost-parables>.
2. See Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
3. At the same time Butler noted that the difference between Earth and the screaming Children of Bow—four generations—was the same temporal distance between slavery and her own Baby Boomer birth, suggesting that the radical difference of that future might not be so monstrous after all.
4. The draft is designated by the Huntington as OEB 2994.
5. OEB 523; OEB 520.
6. OEB 520; closing ellipsis in original.
7. OEB 519.
8. OEB 518.
9. OEB 505.
10. Atwood describes her concept of *ustopia* in her book *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Anchor, 2012).
11. Audre Lorde, "A Litany for Survival," *The Black Unicorn* (New York: Norton, 1978): 31-32.
12. OEB 1002, journal entry dated June 6, 1976.
13. Octavia E. Butler, "Furor Scribendi," *Bloodchild and Other Stories* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005): 137-143 (143).